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Historicizing Allusion: Interpretive Play in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

Since first coined by Julia Kristeva to encapsulate the universalizing poststructuralist declaration that “any text is the absorption and transformation of another,” the word “intertextuality” has since been itself absorbed and transformed to mean so many different things that it is now practically meaningless. William Irwin has done more than any other theorist to explain the decline of this once-revolutionary word, but rather than reassert its high theoretical glory he wisely suggests we dispense with it altogether. The problem with understanding all texts to be necessarily and entirely intertextual is that such a view distracts from the very real ways in which texts explicitly relate to other texts – e.g., allusion.

Allusion, again best-theorized by Irwin, is an identifiable formal device employed by authors when they intend to confront audiences with the relationship between the author’s text and another; this definition obviously contradicts Barthes and others who gloried in the death of the author, but just as obviously it accounts for realities that inform literary composition: even if Kristeva was right that all discourse is interrelated and contingent, there are particular moments of discourse that foreground this interrelatedness, that force readers to confront their knowledge or ignorance of cultural touchstones. As the word’s etymology suggests, a necessary component of allusion is play, or uncertainty: an author makes a connection, a reader must decipher what it means.

My paper will explore Irwin’s theory in the context of early modern drama: did Elizabethan reading practices allow for Shakespeare’s references to Ovid to create the variable meanings implicit in allusion, or does the theory of this formal device need to be rethought in order to account for the evolution of discursive norms? The multiple allusions to the Actaeon myth in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* provide a compelling locus for addressing this crucial question.